

The Salt Lake Tribune

State Capitol displays dinosaur bones, artifacts

Natural History Museum is still performing archaeological research.

By Anna Kartashova

Posted: 02/05/2009 12:01:00 AM MST



Judith McConkie, curator at the Utah State Capitol finishes installing bones in an exhibition case of a previously unknown ceratopsian (horned dinosaur) discovered by the Utah Museum of Natural History in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. It is believed to be 75 million years old. (Al Hartmann photo / Salt Lake Tribune)

Dinosaur enthusiasts might find the prehistoric creatures' bones fascinating, but wait until they see their skin.

The Utah Museum of Natural History offers what most people haven't seen before: an almost complete skull of a horned dinosaur, its nearly full left arm with skin impressions on shoulder and forearm, and more than 20 anthropological objects on display at the State Capitol.

"I've always been fascinated with dinosaurs, but when I saw the skin print, it brought these dinosaurs to life," said Tim Lee, an exhibit designer at the museum.

Eric Lund, paleontology lab manager at UMNH and a second-year University of Utah geology graduate student, discovered the 75 million-year-old bones of the centrosaurian ceratopsian at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in fall 2006.

Lund was in southern Utah conducting general survey work and looking for material when he saw eroding bones protruding from a small knoll.

He climbed the hill and found there was enough of the animal there to perform an excavation. After obtaining permits, Lund and four volunteers spent about a week digging out the bones.

The dinosaur's species is so rare, it doesn't have a name yet. "Hopefully, our team will give it a name in the next year or so," Lund said.

When excavated, the late Cretaceous period skull bones weighed about 1,000 pounds, including the rock, and the arm block weighed 150 pounds.

Specialists removed rock particles in a lab, and the skull now weighs about 100 pounds, and five arm bones have a combined weight of 75 pounds. There are no hand bones.

The museum's satellite exhibit has been installed at the Capitol for two reasons: The museum doesn't have enough space for display, and it's an opportunity to form an alliance with Utah lawmakers.

"It's a great way to create a partnership between the museum and the state and show it's not a stagnant museum," Lund said. "We're still doing research here."

When the Capitol began renovation, it was decided the main area will be used for exhibits as in the past, said Judith McConkie, curator of the Capitol.

"We have built replicas of original exhibit cases, and in order to fill them we went looking" for historic artifacts, she said. The Capitol has filled five cases so far, and it eventually plans to fill 14, she said.

The dinosaur bones fill one of them.

The presentation's title is "Solving Puzzles in Bone and Stone," and its key is to define the relationship of its objects to each other as well as their environment.

By analyzing the discovered dinosaur's arm, the researchers concluded it was of subadult age and lived in a river system.

"You look at [the area] today, and it's a desert," Lund said. "It changed so much."

The exhibit also features archaeological artifacts -- spearheads, mano and metate used for grinding corn -- that Jesse Jennings, a UMNH founding director, excavated with his group at Danger Cave, near Wendover in 1949. The display includes Jennings' research materials, such as a measuring stick, a surveying tool, his camera and compass.

"You really get the perspective of how valuable Utah and its natural resources are to our scientists, whether they're paleontologists or archaeologists," Lee said.

"History just doesn't come from books," McConkie said. "It comes from bones, ... photographs and all kinds of things, so it's a great way to talk about Utah history that's millions of years old."